

Graphic Vulnerability: Performative Masculinity in Joshy Benedict's *The Pig Flip*

AJAY M

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Sri Sathya Sai University for Human Excellence, Karnataka

Abstract

This study explores the interaction between the concept of performative masculinity and the aesthetics of vulnerability in Joshy Benedict's graphic novel, The Pig Flip. Set in the picturesque rural landscape of Kerala, the story revolves around Babycha, a compulsive gambler who is determined to restore his life alongside his wife, Paulikutty. This study examines how the novel's uncanny spaces intensify Babycha's underlying vulnerabilities, leading him to engage in performative acts of masculinity. This analysis is based on a careful examination of both visual and literary aspects. The paper examines crucial moments and character development in The Pig Flip to demonstrate how it subverts traditional tropes of male power and emotional suppression, presenting a sophisticated depiction of male identity. This inquiry adds to wider conversations in the fields of literature, vulnerability studies and gender studies, highlighting the graphic novel's capacity to mirror and transform current perceptions of masculinity.

Keywords: performativity, antiquarian uncanny, masculinity, vulnerability, power dynamics

Introduction

The Pig Flip, a graphic novel authored by Joshy Benedict, explores the complex mechanics of the gambling scene in rural Kerala. The novel takes place in a mysterious and unsettling setting, an uninhabited island, where the male residents of a village congregate at midnight to participate in a high-risk card game called Spot Flip. This game, often regarded as the epitome of all card games, serves as a key focal point that the plot revolves around. Babycha, the main character, is a compulsive gambler who is attempting to separate himself from his addiction after marrying his beloved Paulikutty.

Nevertheless, the irresistible appeal of Spot Flip proves overwhelming, enticing Babycha back into its clutches and causing him to lose all that he has meticulously constructed. The narrative powerfully depicts his battle and ultimate submission to his dependency, ending in severe actions undertaken by his family to save him and his dwindling in society as a result. Benedict's work is notable not only for its captivating narrative but also for its vivid portrayal of the cultural and social context of Kerala. The novel explores the interconnected themes of addiction, vulnerability, and the performative nature of masculinity, providing readers with a profound and impactful narrative experience. The novel offers a profound

exploration of human emotions and societal forces in contemporary graphic fiction, using a combination of vivid visuals and compelling storytelling.

The Pig Flip is a fascinating graphic novel, translated from Malayalam by K.K. Muralidharan and told and illustrated by Joshy Benedict, is a captivating and hallucinatory story that explores addiction and its consequences. It leaves a lasting and unsettling impression on the reader's mind.

Joshy Benedict hails from Kerala and is a proficient artist and animator. He completed his studies at the Government Fine Arts College in Thrissur and obtained his degree. The Pig Flip, his first graphic novel, received extensive praise from the creative and literary communities in Kerala upon its initial release in Malayalam under the title Pannimalath.K.K. Muralidharan, the translator of the novel is a production designer and graphic artist who is located in Mumbai and runs his own design firm there. Murali, who was born and reared in Wayanad, completed his education at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad in 1994.

The Pig Flip by Joshy Benedict occupies a unique position in modern literature and the domain of graphic novels because of its subtle examination of addiction, masculinity, and cultural identity. As a graphic novel, it

distinguishes itself by skillfully incorporating intricate concepts into a visually captivating storyline that deeply connects with contemporary readers. The depiction of the cultural backdrop of gambling in Kerala is highly nuanced, effectively illustrating its influence on communal dynamics and individual lives. The portrayal of gambling, specifically Spot Flip, in the story focuses not just on its recreational nature but also on its addictive hold on the main character, Babycha. The portrayal of his experience with the extreme ups and downs of gambling addiction is depicted with a genuine openness that is both deeply moving and easy to identify with. It is a noteworthy contribution to modern graphic literature due to its culturally immersive backdrop, compelling narrative, and profound psychological analysis. It challenges the limits of the genre by tackling significant social problems while also keeping a captivating and visually appealing storyline. This novel is both entertaining and thought-provoking, making it a remarkable contribution to the area of graphic novels and modern literature.

In this study, Aesthetics of Vulnerability pertains to the artistic and narrative depiction of characters' fragility, emotional openness, and sensitivity to external influences. This notion emphasises the duality of vulnerability, as it can serve as both a source of resilience and a potential vulnerability. In the realm of literature and graphic novels, the depiction of this concept is frequently portrayed by exploring the psychological conflicts, interpersonal connections, and reactions of characters to their surroundings. Through the display of vulnerability, authors and artists have the potential to elicit empathy, establish profound emotional bonds, and delve into intricate psychological terrains. The Pig Flip portrays Babycha's susceptibility through his dependence and the resulting consequences on his life and connections, specifically inside the disconcerting and eerie environments he occupies.

Furthermore, the concept of Performative Masculinity is a term originating from the field of gender studies, which refers to the demonstration of culturally defined behaviours and attitudes that are typically associated with being masculine. It implies that masculinity is not an innate characteristic but rather a collection of behaviours and behaviours that people adopt in reaction to societal norms. This performance frequently entails showcasing physical

power, resilience, and authority, while repressing emotions and susceptibility. Babycha's behaviour and decisions in The Pig Flip are greatly impacted by his need to conform to traditional masculine norms. This exacerbates his difficulties with addiction and affects his interactions with others.

Rural Kerala and Uncanny Spaces

Rural Kerala, situated in the southwestern region of India, is famous for its verdant scenery, expansive backwaters, and abundant cultural legacy. The region is distinguished by its tropical environment, with a monsoon season that has a substantial impact on agricultural activities and daily living. Rural villages in Kerala typically exhibit a tightly-knit communal framework, where households are involved in agricultural activities, fishing, and traditional craftsmanship. Kerala is a culturally diverse region, characterised by a patchwork of various customs, languages, and faiths. The state's cultural landscape is enriched by the practice of Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, which are the predominant religions here. Christianity in Kerala has a long and significant history, originating from the advent of Saint Thomas the Apostle in the 1st century. The Christian communities of Kerala are renowned for their unique churches, religious festivities, and educational establishments.

The narrative of The Pig Flip is significantly influenced by the rural environment of Kerala. The hidden island where the secret gambling occurs is portrayed in front of the beautifully detailed countryside scenery. The cultural customs, collective engagements, and striking disparities between everyday existence and the clandestine realm of gambling enhance the narrative, bestowing profoundness and genuineness to the characters' encounters. The characters, especially the protagonist Babycha and his family, adhere to the Christian faith, which shapes their perspective on life, relationships with their community, and individual challenges.

Kerala's historical trajectory is distinctive due to its early engagements with global commerce networks and colonial powers. In the past, the region had a crucial role as a central point for the spice trade, drawing traders from many parts of the globe. The enduring impact of Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial governance has

significantly shaped the social and economic terrain of Kerala. It has been distinguished in the period after its independence for its exceptional literacy rates, forward-thinking social policies, and robust focus on education and healthcare. Nevertheless, rural communities sometimes have socio-economic obstacles, such as unemployment and underemployment, that can give rise to problems like gambling and alcoholism. The socio-economic context of rural Kerala, characterised by a combination of advancements and traditional customs, strongly impacts the setting of *The Pig Flip*. Babycha's compulsive gambling might be viewed as a representation of larger societal problems, where financial constraints and the temptation of immediate monetary rewards compel individuals to engage in hazardous activities. The novel's choice of an uninhabited island as its setting emphasises the themes of seclusion and the desire to escape, which mirror the protagonist's internal and external struggles.

In *The Pig Flip*, the abandoned island is shown as a secluded and unsettling place situated in rural Kerala, away from the usual routes. The subject is enveloped in mystery, granting access solely to individuals who possess knowledge of its existence and are willing to explore its obscure depths during the night time. The island is shown with thick vegetation, decaying buildings, and an atmosphere of neglect, all of which contribute to its eerie and unpleasant ambience. This setting presents a clear and noticeable difference from the often lively and social atmosphere of the village, emphasising the illegal nature of the activities that occur there. The understanding of the abandoned island's importance within the narrative is contingent upon grasping the significance of the concept of the uncanny space. An uncanny space is characterised by its ability to elicit feelings of discomfort, eeriness, and unease, frequently by blurring the distinction between what is familiar and what is new. The island in *The Pig Flip* functions as an eerie setting where conventional social norms and behaviours are temporarily disregarded. The island's seclusion from the rest of the community intensifies the feeling of being on another planet and the potential hazards, making it a suitable setting for the high-risk gaming that ensnares Babycha and the other men in the village.

The deserted island carries substantial symbolic significance within the narrative's framework. The Babycha's addiction and internal battle are driven by the opposing powers of solitude and temptation, which are represented by it. The island's seclusion represents Babycha's emotional and social isolation. The individual's frequent visits to the island for gambling sessions demonstrate his disengagement from both family and community life, emphasising the isolating aspect of his addiction. The protagonist's physical detachment from the community symbolises his increasing emotional alienation from his wife Paulikutty and the shared life they are attempting to construct.

The island is also a site of profound allure. Babycha finds the high-stakes card game, Spot Flip, extremely tempting, causing him to return to it even though he does his hardest to resist. The isolated setting of the island offers him a sanctuary where he may freely engage in his addiction without facing immediate criticism or intervention, therefore serving as both a haven and a snare. The island's deteriorated and unsettling aspect further enhances its metaphorical significance, symbolising the deteriorating impact of addiction on Babycha's life. Similar to the island's state of neglect and decay, Babycha's personal and familial stability is also failing due to his compulsive behaviour.

All in all, the abandoned island in *The Pig Flip* serves as a potent symbol that represents the themes of loneliness, temptation, and the detrimental effects of addiction. It acts as a poignant reminder of the protagonist's hardships and the sinister attraction of the gambling realm that poses a threat to engulf him.

Exploring Performative Masculinity

Performative masculinity encompasses the demonstration of behaviours and attitudes that conform to the established societal norms and expectations for men. This notion, derived from the field of gender studies, suggests that masculinity is not an innate characteristic but rather a collection of behaviours and behaviours enacted in reaction to environmental influences. The character of Babycha in *The Pig Flip* is an intriguing example of analysing the concept of performative masculinity. Specifically, his display of vulnerability prompts him to

adopt conventional masculine norms, resulting in a multifaceted battle to define his own identity.

Hsing-Yuan Liu states, "Performative masculinity or "doing gender" is the adoption of traits considered to be "masculine" to achieve acceptance in society."

I propose that Babycha's susceptibility is complex, stemming from a combination of socio-economic pressures, emotional isolation, and a deep-seated gambling addiction. Indeed, his performativity is to gain acceptance in society. The daily obstacles of maintaining his livelihood, get progressively arduous as his addiction engulfs more of his time and resources. This addiction, prevalent among males in his culture, exacerbates his social isolation and intensifies his feelings of powerlessness. One of his motives was to be of monetary help to the household and run the family, especially after the death of his father. The female characters, applaud their men for hoarding money and better their living standards, Paulikutty, "She was genuinely sympathetic towards my unending efforts to make money" (Benedict 12), says Babycha.

There are also certain societal norms that require men to display qualities such as strength, control, and financial stability. Babycha keenly experiences the intensity of these expectations. In order to adhere to these principles, he endeavours to conceal his weaknesses by assuming a facade of capability and power. The expectation of men to perform domestic chores was less to nothing, while Paulikutty worked, for instance, washing clothes, he would offer to accompany her and call it help.

The imperative to embody masculinity is not solely driven by personal vanity, but also by the obligation to meet the societal and familial expectations placed upon him.

The paradox of performative masculinity lies in the fact that while Babycha attempts to personify the ideal of a dominant male, he experiences an increasing sense of powerlessness. The consistent and unwavering performance of the individual leads to a situation where his ability to take action is compromised, as his authentic identity is eclipsed by the facade he attempts to present. His endeavours to project strength and maintain authority frequently lead to behaviours that expose his internal distress and lack of confidence.

Gender and identity are influenced by cultural norms and individual encounters. Babycha's endeavour to preserve his individuality in the face of these forces exposes the dynamic and artificial essence of both. His self-perception is continuously changing, being shaped by his surroundings, his dependency, and his interpersonal connections. The societal framework of masculinity necessitates the suppression of his weaknesses, thereby adding complexity to his process of self-acceptance. Performative masculinity frequently entails theatrical and extravagant behaviours intended to elicit astonishment and admiration. Babycha participates in The Pig Flip to establish his identity and earn admiration. His engagement in high-stakes gambling is a public display aimed at showcasing his courage and expertise, despite the fact that it gradually undermines his personal life. He experiences considerable anxiety due to the perpetual pressure to conform to societal expectations of masculinity, which consistently undermines his personal autonomy. The distinction between his outwardly expressive persona and his innate, authentic identity becomes more evident, resulting in a condition of mental conflict known as cognitive dissonance. This uneasiness becomes evident in his relationships and decisions, causing him to become more neurotic. As a result, his existential drive, fantasies, and ability to take action are pushed into the background.

Babycha's struggle exemplifies a wider societal problem in which the dominant notions of masculinity confine men to inflexible positions. The trip he undertook demonstrates the significant influence of performative masculinity on one's personal identity, ability to take action, and mental well-being.

Visualising Emotional Depth: Antiquarian Uncanny

The antiquarian uncanny is a notion that describes the eerie and unsettling feeling caused by the presence of the past in the present. This feeling is evoked by physical things, places, and memories that create a sense of alienation and unease. The abandoned island in The Pig Flip plays a crucial role in these strange encounters, greatly impacting Babycha's expression of masculinity and feelings of unease.

Pramod K Nayar defines it as, "The antiquarian uncanny is the effect of the coexistence of current lifeforms

meshed contemporary with advanced techno-science with 'primitive' and 'primaeval' forms." (Nayar 63)

This chapter explores the impact of the eerie landscapes found in rural Kerala, namely the island, on Babycha's mental distress and obsessive actions. The rural environment of Kerala, characterised by its abundant vegetation, deteriorating buildings, and remote areas, frequently represents eerie and ghostly landscapes. These settings are infused with recollections of distressing histories and uncertain current circumstances, generating an atmosphere where the known becomes unfamiliar and the unfamiliar becomes known. The island where Babycha and other men congregate to engage in gambling exemplifies this feeling of the mysterious and unsettling. Furthermore, these lines add on to the eerie backdrop "In those days, the secret gambling den where we played spot flip was an abandoned little island. The island belonged to Pillachan, a reclusive man who had forsaken the place and vanished." (Benedict 1)

The island encompasses not only a physical geographical area, but also serves as a site of profound emotional distress and unconventional aspirations. It symbolises a location where conventional social rules are set aside, and men participate in activities that are both clandestine and unlawful. This setting promotes a feeling of duplicity, as people live two separate lives—one conforming to society norms during the day, and another engaging in secret activities on the island, exemplified in the lines "Ever since Pillachan's disappearance, the gentfolk of the locality have lost connection with the island. As if it's a piece of land that has drifted away from their world." (Benedict 5)

Pramod K Nayar's discussion of the antiquarian uncanny revolves around the idea of the present being haunted by vestiges of the past. This haunting is often experienced through tangible things and spaces that recall hidden memories and secrets. The island, once possessed by Pillachan who vanished under unknown circumstances, exemplifies this occurrence. The presence is spectral, contemplating the past and evoking a feeling of uneasiness among visitors.

The island's peculiar and ancient nature, surprisingly detached from the present, adds to the eerie ambiance. It is a location where historical and contemporary elements

intersect, resulting in an environment that is simultaneously recognisable and unfamiliar. The conflicting sounds create a sense of tension and emotional disruption in Babycha, causing him to feel attracted to the island despite the fear and unease it produces.

Spectral Geography refers to the study of the distribution and characteristics of different wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation with relation to the Earth's surface.

Spectral geography pertains to locations where the individual appears to experience a loss of coherence and identity. The island functions as a place where Babycha's individuality and ability to take action are suppressed by the lingering influence of the past and the eerie ambiance. The seclusion and concealment of the island intensify his sense of impotence and confinement, driving him deeper into a state of performative anxiety.

Moreover, Babycha's frequent trips to the island and his irresistible gambling habit might be seen as a manifestation of mimetic approximation, as he strives to replicate the prior triumphs and excitement of gambling. The repetitive behaviour highlights his effort to uphold his masculine performance despite intense discomfort and a feeling of being disconnected. The island, being amysterious place, greatly exacerbates Babycha's struggle with her ability to take action and her sense of self. The contrast between his outwardly expressive persona and his authentic identity becomes increasingly evident in this unsettling environment, resulting in a significant disruption of his cognitive and emotional state. The individual's existential encounter is characterised by perplexity and a deep feeling of confinement, in which the dominant ideals of masculinity serve as a metaphor for his state of being trapped.

The deserted island in *The Pig Flip* serves as a potent representation of the eerie and mysterious nature of the past, which persistently lingers in the present. The realm of spectral geography has a profound impact on Babycha's expression of masculinity and feelings of unease, highlighting the mental and emotional strain of conforming to conventional norms. The island's eerie existence serves as a constant reminder of the unavoidable impact of trauma and the all-encompassing power of the past on one's personal identity and ability to take action.

Evolving Masculinities

The novel "The Pig Flip" portrays the protagonist, Babycha, undergoing a notable transformation in terms of his masculinity and sensitivity. This chapter traces the development of Babycha's character throughout the novel, emphasising the pivotal moments that influence his identity amid extraordinary hardships. Through the analysis of these instances, we acquire a more profound comprehension of how Babycha manages the intricate interaction between societal norms and individual susceptibilities. Initially, Babycha is depicted as a man heavily involved in the rural lifestyle of Kerala, weighed down by socio-economic challenges and a crippling need on gambling. The man's weaknesses are clearly seen in his relationships with his wife, Paulikutty, and his covert visits to the deserted island for gambling. These initial scenes depict Babycha's challenge with portraying masculinity in a performative way, as he attempts to appear as a responsible spouse while giving in to his addiction.

The union of Babycha and Paulikutty represents a momentous milestone in his life. The union entails a rejuvenated sense of accountability and a chance to liberate oneself from his dependency. Nevertheless, the societal pressure to adhere to the expectations of being a commendable spouse and provider amplifies his necessity to embody traditional masculine traits. During this period, Paulikutty consistently provides sincere compassion and support, while Babycha grapples with an internal conflict to resist gambling.

In spite of his efforts to live a dignified existence, Babycha is irresistibly lured back to the island's gambling establishment. The island, with its eerie ambiance, represents both allure and the location of his previous shortcomings. This relapse is a pivotal moment that intensifies his weaknesses and adds more pressure to his display of masculinity. The island's ethereal topography serves as a perpetual reminder of his inner turmoil and the inevitable grip of his addiction. The pinnacle of Babycha's storyline unfolds when his addiction results in devastating losses. This era of profound turmoil not only exhausts his financial resources but also fractures his relationship with Paulikutty. Babycha is compelled to face the repercussions of his acts, which prompt him to acknowledge the true

nature of his outwardly displayed masculinity and the negative impact it has had on his life. This critical moment underscores the harmful consequences of society expectations and the false image of masculinity that he has been striving to uphold. Following his downfall, Babycha embarks on a period of introspection and endeavours to seek redemption. Deprived of his false beliefs of authority and influence, he starts to comprehend the extent of his weaknesses and the pointlessness of his outward displays. Babycha's current phase is characterised by a very reflective examination of his identity and the necessity for authentic transformation. Babycha's perception of his manhood starts to change, yet the island's eerie impact and lingering presence persist.

The character arc of Babycha in *The Pig Flip* shows the significant influence of eerie environments on the growth of masculinity and personal identity. The transformation of this individual, from a susceptible individual conforming to cultural norms to someone who confronts the repercussions of his behaviour and embarks on a quest for penance, highlights the dynamic and ever-changing essence of masculinity. The unsettling difficulties he faces, namely the eerie atmosphere of the island, act as triggers for his personal growth. Babycha's progression serves as a witness to the intricate nature of masculine identity and the lasting impact of prior tragedies.

Conclusion

The Pig Flip, written by Joshy Benedict, skillfully delves into the complex dynamics of performative masculinity and vulnerability in the eerie and mysterious landscapes of rural Kerala. The comic novel explores the socio-cultural forces that drive men to assume and maintain male norms, frequently sacrificing their authentic identities, through its protagonist, Babycha. The deserted island, a prominent theme in the narrative, functions as both a tangible and mental realm where the past and present intersect, fostering a conducive atmosphere for self-reflection and metamorphosis. Babycha's story exemplifies the wider challenges encountered by individuals who find themselves torn between cultural norms and their own aspirations. The protagonist's compulsive gambling habit, juxtaposed with the unsettling and solitary atmosphere of the island, emphasises the all-encompassing power of the mysterious and unsettling elements of the past. Babycha's

performative behaviours and the resulting crises of identity and agency are intensified in this place, which is filled with vestiges of the past and symbolic representations of trauma and concealment. Within the narrative, significant pivotal moments, such as Babycha's union with Paulikutty, his repeated slips into gambling, and the eventual disaster he encounters, emphasise the delicate and intricate nature of masculine identity. The persistent efforts to embody the legendary portrayal of a man, motivated by both inner aspirations and external influences, result in a deep-seated feeling of impotence and unease. These experiences exemplify the fundamental contradiction of performative masculinity, in which the quest for strength and dominance frequently leads to fragility and a diminished sense of control. The culmination of Babycha's narrative, characterised by introspection and a cautious step towards atonement, implies the possibility of developing and transforming notions of masculinity. It challenges the inflexible frameworks of gender and identity, suggesting a more adaptable and self-reflective comprehension of masculinity. The phantom topography of the island, characterised by its eerie presence and symbolic importance, continues to shape Babycha's expedition, serving as a reminder to readers of the lasting influence of history on the current situation. The examination of performative masculinity and the aesthetics of vulnerability in *The Pig Flip* presents numerous opportunities for additional investigation. Subsequent research endeavours could investigate the depiction of masculinity in additional graphic literary works, drawing comparisons and contrasts with the figure of Babycha. Incorporating psychology, cultural studies, and gender studies into multidisciplinary approaches could enhance our understanding of how graphic narratives such as *The Pig Flip* influence and mould societal norms related to masculinity and identity. Comparative studies examining other cultural contexts can provide insights into how different socio-economic and cultural environments shape the development and expression of masculinity. Although this study provides interesting insights into the concepts of performative masculinity and the antique uncanny, it does have certain limits. The analysis predominantly centres on the character of Babycha, possibly disregarding other noteworthy

characters and topics included in the graphic novel. Furthermore, the study's dependence on particular lines and situations may restrict a more comprehensive understanding of the narrative's overall influence. To overcome these limitations, future study could enhance its scope by embracing a broader spectrum of viewpoints and doing a more comprehensive textual examination of the full graphic novel.

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